

Identity, Belonging and Family Formation

Namita Manohar

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Brooklyn College – City University of New York. 3612 James Hall, 2900 Bedford Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11210 USA. Email: NManohar@brooklyn.cuny.edu

Beyond Chrismukkah: The Christian-Jewish Inter-Faith Family in the United States.

By Samira K. Mehta,

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Samira K. Mehta's *Beyond Chrismukkah: The Christian-Jewish Interfaith Family in the United States* provides a rich, ethnographic account of marriages between Catholics, Protestants and Jews in the United States during the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. The book is a welcome addition to the largely quantitative social science analyses of inter-religious marriages/families in America. Its inclusion of the millennial generation also makes it especially timely considering evidence from a 2016 study by Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life that "27% of young adults in the millennial generation say they were raised in a religiously mixed family." As is often the case in such research, the book is fundamentally about identity, belonging and family formation. Mehta's methodological approach however, enlivens the topic, enabling her to advance an innovative and theoretically interesting argument that makes the book relevant beyond its American context.

Beyond Chrismukkah analyzes the "shifting distinctions that various actors draw between religion and culture in the lives of interfaith families and the strategic purposes that those distinctions serve" (p. 3). To do this, Mehta does two things: places practices at the centre of her analysis and uncovers their workings through the use of an impressive array of carefully synchronized ethnographic methods. These include interviews with fifty families and religious professionals; analyses of the Jewish Reform movement's institutional positions on interfaith marriage, Catholic policies and theologies of marriage, and the mainline Protestant magazine *The Christian Century*; and examinations of assorted advice manuals, children's literature and select film and television shows that engage with Christian-Jewish intermarriage. The result is a multi-layered, nuanced narrative of the seismic shift in interfaith family life from the 1970s and 1980s insistence on the value of a mono-religious (Jewish) family, with none to some exposure to the other faith tradition especially in interracial, interfaith homes, to the "new hybrid family practices and religious cultures" (p. 2) that characterize the "multicultural interfaith families" (p. 203) of the millennial generation, now normalized and valorised to be a "moral good" (p. 160). Mehta argues that, Christian-Jewish interfaith couples strategically differentiate between religion and culture to construct "a pastiche of traditions" (p. 139; 209) grounded largely in (home based) practices of consumption to constitute their

multicultural interfaith families. They do this by drawing on the logics of American multiculturalism - especially that of optional ethnicity predicated on autonomous actors (and family units) choosing among a range of ethnic and religious practices and products to shape an identity – and that of the “seeker culture” (p. 142) in the American religious landscape – the increasingly individualized and consumer model of religious practice. Fundamental to this is disconnecting practices and objects from their religious moorings, thereby rendering them to be culturally equivalent, blendable and consumable in a new, hybrid, composite whole perhaps best illustrated in the holiday of Chrismukkah.

The true contribution of this argument lies in Mehta uncovering how this differentiation, most often rhetorical, is negotiated, contested and contradicted by multiple actors – religious leaders, couples themselves, authors, film and screen writers – as they attempt to locate interfaith families within religious organizations, communities, extended families, the American nation and social landscape; how the politics of race and consumption are fundamental to this enterprise; and how far from being religious “nones” (the bogeyman of interfaith marriages) or lacking moral formation and community life, multicultural interfaith families are in fact anchored in a moral framework rooted in mutual respect and gender egalitarianism. As a fellow researcher of (Catholic) interfaith marriages, albeit in the South Asian context, it is in Mehta’s attentiveness to what I think of as the “processes undergirding the practices” that the book is most useful: offering well-conceptualized analytical tools that might be adapted to diverse cultural/country contexts.

After the introduction, which lays out the question, methodology, organization of the book and emergent argument, the book comprises six empirically based chapters and the conclusion. Chapters one through three comprise the core of the policy, media and literature analyses and serve to historicize Mehta’s argument. Chapter 1 reviews the institutional policies of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Catholic Church and the attitudes of the Protestant mainline as articulated in *The Christian Century*, to trace the institutional stances on interfaith marriage between 1965 and 1980. Mehta argues that the relative flexibility of mainline Protestantism toward interfaith marriages compared with the rigidity of Catholicism and Reformed Judaism is inherently a function of their location in the American racial landscape. Responding from the position of “[racial] minority religions who were just becoming American” (p. 41), the latter two were particularly concerned with the continuity and longevity of the community in the US. Their leadership thus attempted to prevent and/or “minimiz[e] the damage both to the couple and to the religious community” (p. 34) through stringent directives on solemnizing marriages (for example: dispensations in the Catholic context) and on raising children within a single religion (Jewish or Catholic). In contrast, as the “the baseline for mainstream American culture” (p. 41), Protestant responses were much more muted, emphasizing the “individual rights of the marrying couple” (p. 42). Thus, the chapter illustrates the tension between individual choice and conscience and communal and theological allegiances in adjudicating the issue.

Chapters 2 and 3, in their focus on popular sitcoms and the Reform leadership, children’s books and interfaith family manuals respectively, round out the shifting institutional perspectives as the decades age, racial formations are reorganized and interfaith marriages become more prevalent. With a painstaking attentiveness to detail

that can sometimes overwhelm readers unfamiliar with American popular culture and literary media, in Chapter 2, Mehta convincingly demonstrates the valorization of interfaith marriages as a “path to assimilation” (p. 52) in the media sitcoms of the 1970s. She argues that contrary to religious leaders’ anxieties about these marriages, the sitcoms depicted interfaith marriages favourably, the challenges “easy to overcome...through a falling away of difference” (p. 52). Indeed, the “so-called” challenges --- food ways and concerns about children --- were portrayed to exist in the un-assimilated, as yet ethnic, parental generation. The couples embarking on these marriages were already “less extreme in their embodiment [of religion and ethnicity], [and] less committed to religious expression” (p. 77); interfaith marriages could then have happy outcomes. Mehta skillfully peels back the racial project therein: interfaith marriages enabled religious and ethnic minorities (Jews and Catholics) to move out of their ethnic enclaves into a “shared secular American space” (p. 77), which while purportedly neutral, was imbued with the “moral schema...of an inherited Protestant tradition” (p. 53) that emphasized individuality of choice and the privatization of religion. By shedding overt, public embodiment of religious ethnicity, Catholics and Jews could then, “simply” become “American” and join the powerful mainstream.

Chapter 3 is conceptually the most useful section of the book. While examining the attempts by the Reform leadership and authors of children’s books and interfaith family manuals at creating “Jewish families out of interfaith marriages” (p. 13), Mehta articulates the processes by which religion and culture are differentiated by these institutional actors as they mark the boundaries of what it means to be Jewish. And therein lies the complexity of her argument. These actors, she observes, emphasize the greater salience of Judaism as a religion and culture over Christianity by distilling the latter’s complex theology, ritual practices and ethnic cleavages into a “solely creedal force...[essentially] a private set of beliefs [wherein] one can be Christian without participation in community or ritual” (p. 102, 103). Judaism in contrast, has civilizational credence that is “worth preserving” (p. 104), providing the justification for interfaith families to choose to be Jewish in character. But what it means to be Jewish is contested and varied. For the religious leaders, Jewish identity is rooted in “institutional practices that were within rabbinical control” (p.88) – namely religious education and participation in synagogue and in “shifting the benchmark of Jewishness to formally accept patrilineal descent in 1983” (p. 88) – and not necessarily within the home where technically children could be influenced by the other faith tradition. This however, is contested by the authors of children’s books and manuals, who advise the anchoring of Jewish identity within the creation of a single religion (Jewish home) that is “marked as much by *the absence* of Christian practice...as it was by *the presence* of Jewish practice” (p. 110). In the process, actors dichotomize between “doing and being Jewish” (p. 80), concerned more with the performative markers of the identity rather than the emotional ones (i.e. “feeling” Jewish). These are in turn, used by the larger Jewish community to de/legitimize the “authenticity” of the resultant identities and families. Interestingly, Mehta identifies gender as implicit to these maneuvers. It is often Christian wives who, although unfamiliar with Jewish traditions, are commissioned to create Jewish homes often by sacrificing their own religious traditions within the family context; the gender analysis unfortunately, remains underdeveloped. Nonetheless, the analysis underscores the inherent instability of identity categories – in this case religion, culture, family, whose socially constructed character is continuously (re)negotiated and legitimized as correct or true by actors differently positioned within webs of power. It is these

theoretical take-aways that make *Beyond Chrismukkah* applicable beyond the Christian-Jewish American context.

Chapters four through six draw on Mehta's fieldwork. To a fellow ethnographer, it is these chapters that use the voices and narratives of interfaith couples to document "lived religion" that truly animate the book. In Chapter 4, Mehta theorizes an understudied pattern within interfaith marriage in America – that of interracial, interfaith marriages. Drawing upon case studies of white and interracial (African-American/Latinx-white) interfaith couples, Mehta argues that interracial families have greater flexibility in creating some hybridity in their Jewish homes centered on festival celebrations and religious observances and in raising Jewish children than their white counterparts. For the latter, their shared racial majority status facilitates the positioning of Jewish as a minority ethnicity vis-à-vis the Christian partner and thus, worthy of being preserved through the creation of an exclusive Jewish home as outlined in Chapter 3 and strictly policed by the larger Jewish community. Their interracial counterparts however, have to navigate their "double minority status" (p. 112) – questioned about being "real Jews" by a community whose dominant imagery is that of the Ashkenazi, white Eastern European Jew, and marked as the racial other, subject to racism from the larger society. Cultivating hybridity through the inclusion of Black culture into their family culture – for example: in attending a Black church with grandparents, not rigidly holding onto Jewish kosher observance in the home – serves to resist this racialization. It gives the children cultural competence and social capital to operate in a society that racializes them and helps to counter possible accusations of these families desiring to be "white" in a context where the Jewish partner is now cast as white vis-à-vis the racial minority spouse. Multicultural models of family life however, only exist for interracial interfaith families because it is supported and legitimated by the larger Jewish community; white families have no access to this.

In chapter 5, readers are introduced to the interfaith holiday of Chrismukkah, through which Mehta begins to weave her larger argument as outlined earlier in this review using the conceptual tools theorized in chapter 3. While not explicitly drawing on interviews like chapters four and six, this chapter 'feels' like fieldwork because Mehta essentially unpacks 'Chrismukkah' as a case-study, drawing on consumer content connected to the holiday – material items such as cards and ornamentation, young adult literature and television shows. In so doing, the analytic point of the chapter is effortlessly made: the very 'data' used highlights her argument of this holiday, symbolic of millennial multiculturalism, being fundamentally grounded in "practices of consumption" (p. 138). This consumption model of identity is framed by the larger social context defined by ethnic multiculturalism and the seeker model of religious practice, both outlined earlier in this review. In making Chrismukkah the focus of analysis, readers get a sense of how the "rhetorical distinction between culture and religion" (p. 137) operates such that religion is relegated, by the millennial generation, to the "domain of religious institutions, with membership and competing truth claims" while culture "suggests practices...a place where syncretism can occur" (p. 137). As formerly religious practices are now understood only as "constellations of practices and identity rather than manifestations of belief and affiliation" (p. 143), they are rendered blendable without tension. In turn, they are amenable to assuming new meaning and purpose as symbolic family (ethnic/cultural) practices ---"traditions" (p. 143) --- that can be syncretically consumed to signify ethnic/cultural belonging in a

new hybrid whole. Chrismukkah best symbolizes this - it combines Jewish Hanukkah “traditional” home- based practices of lighting menorahs and exchanging gifts and Christian Christmas of Santa Claus, Christmas trees and stockings and is premised on the “holidays’ shared messages of festivity, cheer, friendship, and family” (p. 159). In addition to the analytical intricacies, what makes the chapter particularly interesting is Mehta’s theorizing of the consequent (re)construction of the meaning of Jewish and/or Christian to now, not be centered on theological claims making or belonging to a religious community, but rather, as engaging in certain family based cultural practices. Indeed, just as one was getting adjusted to the meanings of these same identities as articulated in Chapter 3, they are shifted yet again, evocatively illustrating Mehta’s point.

In Chapter 6, Mehta further elucidates the multicultural model of interfaith family life through four exemplars from her interviews. These include: one, which theorists would technically classify as “none” in terms of religious identity and affiliation; another, who self- identify as being of “two religious backgrounds [but] one faith” (p. 172); third, as engaging with their “bothness” (p. 182) through their dual religious and liturgical life, and fourth, who are part of an interfaith community forging an “interfaith religious identity...as a distinct way of being in the world” (p. 197). Mehta’s emphasis on lived experience offers an important intervention into the argument laid out earlier: that the processes of identity and family formation are never stable, singular or cogent as theoretically laid out or promulgated by advice manuals, religious leaders or media, but rather, are messy, complex and varied through the engagement of human actors attempting to make meaning of their own lives. By this, I point to what I consider the two theoretical emphases of the chapter. First, its illustration of the “strong and deeply intentional moral frameworks which animate” (p. 199) these multicultural families premised on gender egalitarianism and mutual respect for religious diversity which put paid to concerns of multicultural families lacking moral formation. Second, Mehta highlights multicultural families being anchored to religious practice and community through their “use of language of faith and mystery to explore their fused identities” (p. 165); theological contradictions are therefore, not bracketed off by “ignoring them or through a profession of secularism” (p. 165) – the technique by which religion and culture can be differentiated.

After weaving the argument of *Beyond Chrismukkah* from the strands of theoretical ideas outlined in the empirical chapters, Mehta concludes the book with a brief note about children raised in interfaith homes. She acknowledges that questions about the religious background and identities of these children cannot be easily answered both because of dearth of data and the vagaries of human agency in determining identity. However, she definitively contends that, considering the changing American social landscape from the mid-20th century to the early 2000s, most especially the increased identity options and resources available to interfaith families, the children, particularly of the millennial generation, are all right!

Overall, *Beyond Chrismukkah* provides a nuanced and theoretically insightful addition to the scholarship on interfaith marriages. Mehta’s skillful and careful writing and the book’s overall organization very easily demonstrates the (re)configurations of identity categories within changing social contexts– for instance: the meanings of “being Jewish” – which “appear” to change from one chapter to the next. That said, the timid and inconsistent gender analysis creates a palpable omission

in a narrative that identifies gender as “a dominant factor in shaping the experiences of interfaith families” (p. 114). Moreover, as an ethnographer, I was also hungry for more details of Mehta’s methodology, participants and their profile and of how Mehta’s positionality of being raised by “Unitarian-Hindu parents” (p. 210) shaped her ethnography. Nonetheless, *Beyond Chrismukkah* is an engaging oeuvre whose greatest appeal lies in that it makes a convincing, empirically rooted argument whose conceptual building blocks are adaptable beyond its Christian-Jewish, American context making it broadly relevant.